



October 9, 2012

It's that time of the year again. The warm summer air has relinquished itself to the brisk autumn breeze. The leaves of trees have traded their dark green hues for vibrant reds and yellows. The pumpkin has reclaimed its rightful place on front porches and in recipe books everywhere. It's a favorite season for many, and for us hawk-watchers at Acadia National Park, it represents a bittersweet change.

Yesterday was my last day at Hawk Watch helping visitors to watch and learn about the migrating raptors. While it wasn't a busy day on Cadillac Mountain for birds of prey, totaling only four migrants, I was surprised by how many visitors attended our program-in particular, young, budding naturalists. One 5th grade child reminded me of what I was like at 11 years old. She was highly intrigued by raptors, would visit wildlife rehabilitation centers after school, and read all the same nature books. Having traveled the long distance from South Carolina, she was anxious see Acadia's famous hawks and falcons in action. Unfortunately, it was a bad-weather day for migration, and I had only seen three hawks all morning.

You could read the disappointment on her face. She understood wildlife watching, how it was random and unguaranteed, but that didn't help to wipe away her crushed feelings. Hoping to make her feel better, I gathered her and the other children together to learn about raptor hunting and flight using a preserved Sharp-shinned Hawk, Barred Owl wing, and American Kestrel tail feather. She instantly brightened at the sight of the hawk, and before I could even finish my questions, she would throw her hand up, eager to tell me everything she had learned about raptors in school. She had clearly done her homework.

By the end of the lesson, she looked satisfied; the day was saved. She had not only learned lots of new facts but also had demonstrated how 'bird-smart' she was. As she started to leave, her parents told me she wanted to be a wildlife veterinarian, exactly as I had wanted at her age. It was all too familiar. I knew with the proper encouragement and support, she could fulfill those dreams. I couldn't help but think what an experience like Hawk Watch might have been for her. Then, I started wondering about all the other kids in the group, who might become the next great biologist, nature writer, or conservationist. That's when it happened.

"Bird!" Announced the ranger. The large white patch on its rump gave it away instantly; the long tail and wings held in a 'V' confirmed it. It was a Northern Harrier, an owl-like-faced raptor commonly seen, but in fewer numbers (average 73 sightings per season!). She jumped up, lifted her binoculars, and let out a long, "Wooooow!" The moment was brief, but that's all it took. It was the last bird we saw that day. As my last day at Hawk Watch, it was the last time I'd share the amazing world of raptors with a visitor as this year's Raptor Intern.

While we were taking down the Hawk Watch signs to leave that day, I reflected on the season rapidly coming to an end. I had seen hundreds of hawks migrating south and spoken to thousands of visitors, some from distant places across the globe. Yet, the memories that spoke the loudest were spent teaching youth about raptors. Hawk Watch provided amazing opportunities to engage youth, and before I had come to Acadia National Park, I hadn't known how fulfilling that was. Now, as I move forward in my career, I'll leave Cadillac Mountain not only with many great experiences, but also a new found direction: to inspire youth to become life-long investigators of the natural world around them. Of course, I see no harm in biasing them towards birds of prey.

-Matt Wyatt, Raptor Intern, Acadia National Park

**September 27, 2012**

Three-hundred and twenty-one raptors. An incredible final count for the largest migration day I've witnessed this year at Acadia National Park's Hawk Watch. Before this fall, the most raptors I had spotted in one day was a whopping eight Red-tailed Hawks, all perched on highway signs along the road to my parents' house in Tennessee. I know that when I drive down that road again, I'll remember what it was like to see so many raptors soaring over Cadillac Mountain that day.

I had anticipated seeing so many hawks to be an awe-inspiring, breath-taking experience. What I did not plan for was the chaos that would ensue. Initially, the raptors flew by in a steady line, one following the other every few minutes. For a first-time hawk-watcher, this was great practice. I learned to identify the falcons by their rapid flapping and sharp, pointed wings. The American Kestrel, the falcon I saw most often, was clearly smaller than the other two falcons seen at Hawk Watch, the Merlin and Peregrine Falcon. These little visual tricks helped distinguish the falcons from the Accipiters, or forest hawks, which are known by their characteristic three quick wingbeats, long thin tail, and short rounded wings. The Sharp-shinned Hawk was the most common Accipiter, averaging over a thousand sightings annually. Finally, the Buteos are known for their wider profiles, broader wings, and tendency to soar on rising thermals. These include the Red-tailed and Broad-winged Hawks. With these tips and a steady stream of bird of prey, I was beginning to feel comfortable with my raptor identification abilities.

That's when things went out of control. Groups of hawks started zooming by, three to our left, five to our right, and sometimes only with a few vital seconds to get a look at each. Alone, identification would have been futile, but, luckily, Acadia National Park's Hawk Watch has a committed group of volunteers who visit the park each fall to enjoy the raptor migration. It was in those moments of 'bird overload' that I was truly able to admire their fine-tuned, seasoned raptor identification talent. As the birds of prey flew over, they called out names in rapid-fire succession, "Broad-winged Hawk! American Kestrel! Another Broad-wing! Two Sharpies!" The lingo of the Hawk Watch made it easier to keep up: 'Broad-wing' for the Broad-winged Hawks and 'Sharpie' for the Sharp-shinned Hawk. It was amazing how quickly they could recognize the raptors, sometimes spotting them up to three miles away over Frenchman Bay. When the day was over and we totaled our raptor sightings on the datasheet, I was ecstatic: three-hundred and twenty-one migrating raptors. It's because of days like those that the volunteers return each year, and I can clearly understand why.

Watching the birds of prey passing by on their formidable journey that day wasn't just witnessing one of nature's amazing feats, it was also a fun way to test one's birding prowess. Park visitors, beginning birders, and veteran hawk-watchers alike all joined in for the amusement, and when it was all over, they knew it wasn't for naught. The data would be collected and pooled with over 200 Hawk Watches in the United States for research, helping ornithologists study and understand the birds more thoroughly, and potentially learn about changes in the environment-some that may have impacts on us! For these reasons, it's not hard to imagine that someone may go home after a 321-raptor day and decide to start a new Hawk Watch in their hometown. I know I have considered it. Would you?

With only a few weeks of hawk-watching left, make sure to come join us from 9am to 2pm every day (weather permitting!) on the top of Cadillac Mountain, 200 yards down the Cadillac North Ridge Trail. Just follow the signs from the parking lot and blue trail markers

-Matt Wyatt, Raptor Intern, Acadia National Park

**September 16, 2012**

During the first week of watching raptors fly by Cadillac Mountain at Acadia National Park's Hawk Watch, I have been thinking of a saying. It goes, "Where you are is where you are supposed to be." This may sound like it has nothing to do with migrating birds of prey, but allow me to explain.

Migration can be a long, arduous, and dangerous journey. Some raptors, such as the Peregrine Falcon, leave their breeding grounds as far north as the Arctic Circle and travel thousands of miles to South America. For the young birds hatched this summer, this may seem daunting. Between their nest and their winter vacation home lies many dangers. Strong storms could throw them off course, pushing them over water or in a wrong direction. Other raptors could attack them on the migratory flyway, a bird 'road rage' of sorts. Also, don't forget the countless glass windows, towers, and cars that kill millions of birds each year. Despite these few deadly threats, millions of raptors still survive the trip, and if that isn't enough, they make this trip not once, but twice a year-every year. Thus, watching migrating hawks becomes more than a nifty way to spend the late summer and early fall. It truly is witnessing an amazing natural feat by animals that overcome great odds to survive.

On days when the wind is from the south, when raptors are less likely to be migrating, I found it can be easy to feel less enthusiastic. I catch myself thinking, "If the wind was from the north, we may see more hawks." While it is true that migrating raptors prefer a northerly tailwind to push them south instead of fighting a southerly headwind, I've learned that this isn't the best way to approach it. This realization came on a recent south wind day that we counted thirty migrating birds, more than we had had all year. Not to mention, most of these migrants weren't even true raptors-they were Turkey Vultures, a large scavenger that typically doesn't migrate till later in the season. I wondered with each tally on the data sheet if anyone would believe it. It went against my expectation for the species and the winds.

After the day was over, I remembered, "Where I am is where I am supposed to be." This time, however, I put myself in the "shoes" of the migrating birds. The Turkey Vultures may have chosen to migrate when they did for reasons within and out of their control. Maybe it was low food availability, colder temperatures, ingrained genetic behavior, or climate change that caused them to fly by Cadillac Mountain that early September south wind day. Whatever the cause, I realized that the birds facing this challenge don't dwell on how things could be different, more convenient, or easier for them. They simply respond to the environment and make the best decision with what they have.

That day, I learned that my expectations mean little to wildlife that are always "where they are supposed to be," and by keeping an open mind, maybe there is more to experience around me than I let myself think. It goes to show you truly never know what you will see or learn at Hawk Watch, so come join us from 9am to 2pm every day (weather permitting!) on the top of Cadillac Mountain. You can find the Hawk Watch site 200 yards down the Cadillac North Ridge Trail-just follow the signs from the parking lot and blue trail markers. Don't forget, our daily count data is posted daily at [www.hawkcount.org](http://www.hawkcount.org). See you there!

-Matt Wyatt, Raptor Intern

**August 13, 2012**

Welcome back to another exciting year at Acadia National Park's Hawk Watch! My name is Matt Wyatt, Acadia's 2012 Raptor Intern. You may remember me from our Peregrine Watch updates, View from the Aerie. This year, I'll be assisting our enthused rangers and volunteers with Hawk Watch on Cadillac Mountain and writing weekly updates.

If you're unfamiliar with Hawk Watch, have no fear. Just ask yourself this simple question: Do you enjoy watching majestic birds of prey soar overhead and partaking in a significant scientific endeavor? If so, this may be your newest hobby. Every fall, millions of birds must migrate south to find warmer climates and ample food, sometimes flying thousands of miles from North America to Central and South America. Most of the smaller birds will fly at night, but, luckily for us, hawks are diurnal migrants. Using their keen eyesight to follow landmarks for navigation and the rising thermals, or air currents, to lift them high in the air for soaring, hawks are able to make this long, arduous journey using little energy. In some places in the eastern United States, like Hawk Mountain in Pennsylvania, Cape May Observatory, and here in Acadia National Park, it's common to see these raptors pass by in large numbers as they travel along flyways, or bird 'highways,' during good conditions. In fact, last year provided a perhaps once in a lifetime opportunity for the hawk-watchers on Cadillac Mountain, as well as the inner Eastern Atlantic Flyway. In just one day, a record-smashing 3,000 Broad-winged Hawks flew over the heads of many flabbergasted hawk-counters in Acadia alone, causing them to scramble to make an accurate count of all the raptors. Last year's Raptor Intern, Delora Hilleary, described the scene of hawks as "swarms of giant insects circling the sky." Leading up to this season of Hawk Watch, I can only imagine what this migration event must have been like last year to see thousands of raptors soar over in a few short hours. It's hard to erase the thought from the back of my mind, "Could this happen again this year?"

Regardless of whether 3,200 raptors fly over in one day or it's a good season with the same numbers spread out over the seven weeks of Hawk Watch, I'm confident that after this week that it'll be a season to remember. Following our Hawk Watch training, Raptor Ranger Angi King Johnston and I went to the top of Cadillac to examine the observation site. As we were leaving, we spotted a lone hawk in the air. We quickly pulled over and hopped out of the car, eager to get binoculars on it. I ran through a mental check-list of everything I had just learned, examining hawk wing shape and color, until I had narrowed it down to a few potential species. The entire scene lasted for about thirty seconds before the bird disappeared, and, in the end, it was still very challenging to identify. Luckily, I had an experienced ranger to aid my identification skills, much like our participants at Hawk Watch. We discussed and looked at this soaring hawk's broader wings, short rounded tail, uniform light underside of wings with a defined black outline on the outer edges and indeed this was one of those amazing Broad-winged Hawks I had been hearing so much about. Excitedly, it is a glimpse of what to expect over the next couple of months: 1) lots of practice, 2) many days overlooking Frenchman Bay on Cadillac Mountain, a truly beautiful place, and 3) a new and exciting challenge spotting, identifying and counting the birds flying by possibly by the hundreds on good north wind, clear days.

If you'd like to participate in this magical, scientific adventure and perhaps find your next new hobby, I invite you to join us starting Sunday, August 19th from 9am to 2pm every day (weather permitting!) on the top of Cadillac Mountain. You can find the Hawk Watch site 200 yards down the Cadillac North Ridge Trail. It's hard to miss the rangers, volunteers, locals, and visitors who come in their appropriate clothing and binoculars. In the meantime, I'll be practicing my raptor identification using the resources on the Acadia National Park Hawk Watch website: <http://www.nps.gov/acad/naturescience/hawkwatch.htm>. Hope to see you there!

-Matt Wyatt, Raptor Intern